

HB 12.2-4 ~ *looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.* ³ *Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.* ⁴ *In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.*

There's an old joke in Bible Bowl. If you don't know the answer, just say "**Jesus**". Because "**Jesus is the answer**". Brethren, there's truth in the joke! For ultimately, the success of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was not found in their own ability, but in the power of the God in whom they had faith. And ultimately, our ability to overcome our weaknesses and weights is not going to be done through our own power, but in trust and faith in the God who saved us. Ultimately, the thing that will cause us to rise above the waters that are drowning us will be to **look at Christ**.

IS 8.16-17 ~ *Bind up the testimony; seal the teaching among my disciples.* ¹⁷ *I will wait for the Lord, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him.*

AP: I fall. I fail. The people around and before me fall. They fail. But God never does. Jesus never does. And He never will!

PS 16.8-10 ~ *I have set the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken.* ⁹ *Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure.* ¹⁰ *For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.*

Yes, this is a prophecy of Christ—but it also has meaning for the writer and for us at the same time. While it was fulfilled to its perfection in Christ and His resurrection, it also stands as a promise to each of us—that God stands before us as an example, as a guide, and as a help, to all of us.

CONCLUSION

And yet, we look around us, and we see the crashing of the waves. We hear and feel the blowing of the wind. We see the world crashing down around our heads, and in that moment, we can similarly fall in on ourselves, sinking beneath the waves—falling to our own self-image and self-assessment.

But Jesus gives us the same message He gave to Peter: He encourages us, through the Hebrew writer, to **look at the winners**—the various examples of triumphant faith and how God rewarded them with a name, reputation, and spiritual home that stretches into eternity. He encourages us to **look at ourselves**, and understand both our weaknesses and our strengths, and how God is the strong right hand throughout them all. And finally, He encourages us to **look at Him**—to look to Jesus—and see how He is king and conqueror over all the winds and waves. He encourages us in all of this, reaches out His hand and says to us the same thing He said to Peter: "*You of little faith,*" he said, "*why did you doubt?*" (**MT 14.31b**)

INVITATION

QUESTION: How can we be better?

TRN TO HB 12

INTRODUCTION

2024 has been quite the year already! With this year, I reflect back on nearly 16 years of being married. While each year has had their highs and lows, we've generally been continually growing: growing in our relationship, growing our family—the goal, always, is to constantly work towards improvement of ourselves, our family, and our marriage.

B.ILL—Peter Sinking into the Water (*When we think of Peter, he stands as the epitome of growing in faith; one of the best examples is him joining Jesus on the water: MT 14.22-33*) Amazingly, he is able to do something no one other than Jesus ever did: he's able to walk on the water! But, of course, he eventually starts to fall—**why?** *But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!"* ³¹ *Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?"* (**MT 14.30-31**) The reason he begins to slip beneath the waves is because he loses his focus, and when he does, his faith suffers.

BACKGROUND:

As the Hebrew writer reaches the climax of his argument of his book (that Jesus is better than the Law of Moses and the Old Covenant), he seeks to help his audience to understand how they, also, can see their faith grow. He wants them to understand that they can be better—that their faith can be better.

And brothers and sisters, this is a message we all need to hear! For we live in a time of self-satisfaction. We live in a time where people are called to **"live their most authentic self"**. And people follow that advice...right off a cliff. We see in the world around us more and more people who are **"living their truth"**, and it turns out that **"their truth"** results in aimlessness, depression, and purposelessness. And the devil celebrates! For his mission is to make us miserable, lost, selfish, and self-destructive. But God calls for something better. He calls for us to be better! And as we come to **HB 12**, we see that he encourages us, like the original audience, to **take a look** and see how we can grow in our faith—how we can be better!

BD1: Look at the Winners! (12.1a)

ILL—Employee of the Month (used to be a popular thing; you'd walk down a hallway in the office and see pictures of the previous winners; gradually it's been done away with)

ILL—Valedictorian (used to be something to strive for; when I was a kid, this was something I really wanted, only to find out that beginning with my class, it was being done away with; it was disheartening, and resulted in me just not trying so hard)

ILL—Yard of the month (a current program run by our home owner's association; just get a sign; we've never gotten it—never been in the top 5) And yet, honestly, we both talk about it—some day, we'll get there. Some day, we'll get that sign in our yard.

There's something special about that kind of incentive—that real, tangible thing you can point to as a goal and target to obtain. It can be so difficult to be the ideal

employee—that's such a nebulous concept—but when your boss says, **“Look at this person!”**, that makes it feel different! It can be difficult to try to be the best student—to understand and truly succeed in all your subjects. But when your school says, **“Look at this person; they've done it!”** It changes! And it can be the same with all the crabgrass and prairie weeds in the yard. But when your neighbors look with awe at the pillow-like grass down the road and the well maintained, even, lines on the lawn, suddenly, it does seem achievable!

HB 12.1a ~ *Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,*

AP: **“But it's so hard right now! I have so many competing priorities, and being like Jesus? That's so very high a standard! How could I ever hope to achieve it?”** But the Hebrew writer encourages us and tells us that those people stand before us like witnesses: witnesses of God's action—witnesses of God's protection—witnesses of God's grace and power! He tells us, when you think you can't overcome, when you think you've got too much ahead of you or too much on you or too much required of you, **look at the winners!**

HB 11.2,4-5,39 ~ *For by [faith] the people of old received their commendation. ⁴By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks. ⁵By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God. ³⁹And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised,*

Brethren, remember: as we come to **HB 12**, all of **HB 11** stands in the background—Abel, Enoch, Abraham, and Jacob—the **“Hall of Faith”**. These are the biggest names in Hebrew Scripture. These were the names and stories that any of the Jewish Christians would have memorized growing up—much the same way that children play make-believe today pretending to be football players, racers, and YouTubers, kids then would have taken up their slings and stones in honored mimicry of David, trumpets in honor of the Israelite army of Joshua, and raised staffs above their heads in imitation of Moses. And the Hebrew writer is saying something amazing here: their victory, their success, wasn't because of their own power and greatness. It was because of their faith—the same faith you have in you! These stories, these examples, stand today for a powerful purpose—to prepare, to correct, and to direct—so that when we find ourselves sinking, we can take a moment to **take a look at the winners**—those people who fought demons, and men, and whatever may be, and came on the other end, victorious in Christ.

RM 15.4 ~ *For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.*

BD2: Look at Ourselves! (12.1b)

ILL—Funhouse mirror (walking down a wall of mirrors; shorter and squatter in some; taller and thinner in others (I like those); wavy and distorted in a third) We laugh at these images—we laugh at these mirrors. But in truth, so often, our own self-assessment can be just as far off.

ILL—Self-Assessment (1-10 scale; told, “Jesus is a 10”; hate that, because then I have a 9 point scale, don't I?) I often see people struggling, though—their assessment of themselves can be so difficult—they don't have the confidence that I have in them, or they have more confidence than they really ought to have! As this

section of **HB** continues, the writer wants us to **take a look at ourselves!** And this, brethren, is when it can get uncomfortable.

HB 12.1b ~ *let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,*

EX: The **HB** writer doesn't want us to get so tied up in focusing on the faithful of the past that we neglect to look at ourselves. A Christianity that doesn't turn a critical eye inwards isn't as productive as God calls and expects for it to be. But God wants us to look at ourselves and take an assessment. We need to recognize our burdens, our struggles, and our temptation, take assessment of them, and then set them to the side.

AP: Brethren, I want you to do something uncomfortable. I want you to take time today and really look at yourself. Take that critical eye we so often point at others and, instead, point it at yourself. I've provided some index cards at the back of the building. I'd like you to take one today, take a pen, and write down something on it. I want you to write down the biggest weight—the biggest sin—that's entangling you. On that same paper, I want you to write a Bible verse—a passage encouraging or correcting you on that sin—a passage that convicts you on that weight or sin.

PS 119.11 ~ *I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.*

And I want you to pray to God about it. Ask for His help with it. And then I want you to fold that piece of paper up, and put it somewhere safe. And starting today, I want you to make a commitment to lay that encumbrance—that weight and sin—aside.

1CR 10.13 ~ *No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.*

It may not always feel like we can overcome our sins. It may not feel like we can overcome our weights. But Abraham did. Noah did. David and Jacob did. They slipped, they tripped, and they struggled, sure. But then, they ran! And that's what God is calling for us to do! If we're to rise above the waters, we need to **look at ourselves** and make a commitment to run.

EH 6.10-11 ~ *Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. ¹¹Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.*

BD3: Look at Christ! (12.2-4)

But, finally, it wasn't Peter's memory of the faithful before him that saved him as he started to sink. It wasn't his self-assessment of his own sins and weaknesses that ultimately pulled him back above the water. It was when, finally, he **took a look at Christ!**